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ABSTRACT

Small town school boards are made up of conscientious, hardworking, and caring citizens who face arduous economic challenges and difficult educational dilemmas. The changing economy of small towns has led to fewer professionals and business owners participating in boards of education, a rift between educators who are bureaucrats and board members who tend to be entrepreneurs, and a fear of consolidation destroying the identity and cohesiveness of the community. Because of economic insecurities in rural America, small-town school boards must strive to be an anchor for American democracy. They retain the responsibility of keeping communication open and accurate among educators, students, and citizens. Based on material collected via interview and observation, this paper describes these aspects of the current situation for school boards in rural America, and identifies five exemplary practices of small-town school boards: (1) administrative action for school desegregation; (2) parent action for superior schools; (3) teacher-administrator-board communication; (4) student participation in school board meetings; and (5) board-to-board cooperation, encouraging cooperation with neighboring districts in purchasing materials, holding specialized classes, and sharing teacher. (DHP)

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Small-Town School Boards:
Arduous Challenges and Exemplary Practices

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Small-Town School Boards:

Arduous Challenges and Exemplary Practices

In early May, 1989 with signs of spring barely visible on the great plains, we walked from our RV park to a school board meeting in a small North Dakota town, with the white birch trees spraying light green leaves against a vast blue sky and the tall grain elevators standing majestically upon an unending horizon. Five school board members, each of whom greeted us enthusiastically, were quick to talk about their work and commitment in serving a district with citizens who, at times, seemed unappreciative.

There was Jerry, born nearby, who became a teacher and liked being one, but could better support four children by driving for the United Parcel Service at twice the pay of a teacher. Then, Donald, who attended a nearby, one-room country school, now closed, went to college for two years, then went to the military for four and finally returned home to run his parents' farm. Ginnie, who moved around her entire life as a "military brat" and finally settled on her grandparents' centennial farm. And two men who were also locally raised: Sam was a building maintenance manager at the local hospital, and David, after ten years away, had returned to run his parents' farm. Their biographies of returning home again to the small town offered similar

stories to those of other board members with whom we spoke across the small towns of America.

Those five board members in rural North Dakota, along with their superintendent, two principals and a school secretary sat about a large square table in the teacher's lounge of the high school. Coffee and cookies were served as they greeted one other warmly with friendly jokes and hearty laughter. They were soon ready to work and the meeting started promptly at 7:30 pm. Observers of the meeting included two special education teachers, the local newspaper editor and the two of us.

Their initial discussion dealt with an elementary-school student with a learning disability. The two special education teachers, available for consultation, gave their opinions about the student to the board. After lengthy discussion during which all five board members actively took part, the superintendent, the two visiting teachers and the board agreed to provide pedagogical services outside the school district at considerable cost. The decision was complicated; it required information, time and reflection and revealed the caring concerns for students of the board members.

The second item focused on bus transportation. The superintendent brought to the table a map of the district pasted on a large piece of beige cardboard and said, "We have the Englishes and the Packards to pick up here", while

pointing to the map. "If the Farrahs move to town next year we will be able to save about ten minutes. I've got to talk to Sam in the County Office. He says that this road here won't be fixed for another few years. I think three of those families should have their last kids graduating this year, so maybe we don't have to worry." Board members asked questions for clarification but no decision was required. The superintendent was merely informing them of changes in bus routes that might have to occur in the future. After all, parents of school children in rural areas tend to be protective and out spoken about their childrens' bus routes.

From our point of view, that North Dakota Board demonstrated competence, conscientiousness, and civic responsibility. It presented a living portrait of representative democracy in action. The agenda was about improving the quality of life for a child with special needs and trouble-shooting the mundane but inevitable problems of the ubiquitous, yellow school bus.

We were impressed by the quality of the questions asked by the five board members and by the thoroughness of the responses given by the teachers and administrators. We were impressed, too, by how well the board members listened to one another and how efficiently they made a decision. We commented to each other, after the meeting, about how conscientiously those five lay people had taken responsibility for a disabled child. Whereas only two

decades ago, the parents of that little girl would have had to take the primary responsibility for educating her, now five citizens were helping make decisions about the quality of her special education, even the quality of her life. It was an impressive demonstration of how federal and state laws can change responsibility and morality in the ways our schools serve the citizenry. And, the problems of school busses, such as whether the Farrahs will move and save the bus driver ten minutes, are omnipresent in small towns. All over America, small-town boards are dealing with issues ranging from learning disabled children to bus transportation. Both morality and logistics, the sublime and the mundane, are the business of small-town school boards today.

THE STUDY

On sabbatical leave from our respective universities where we provide graduate education for school administrators, we left Oregon on January 2, 1989 driving an RV, nicknamed the White Tortoise for its want of speed, and traveled 9,452 miles in a little over five months to visit 25 small-town districts, randomly selected in 21 states. We traveled from the Northwest through California and the Southwest, turned north up the Mississippi River into the Heartland of the Midwest, turned west at Lake Superior across the Northern Plains and Mountain states, and returned to Oregon in early June.

We visited K-12 districts serving roughly 450 to 2,000 students in incorporated towns that were at least 75 miles away from a major college of education. We spent one week in each school district. Overall, we interviewed 25 superintendents, 84 principals, 119 teachers, 212 students, eight newspaper editors, a few community members and 28 school board members. This paper summarizes the data we obtained from the board members, both our interviews and observations of them, and the data we obtained from administrators, teachers, students, and newspaper editors about their boards.

We were in general curious about the quality of life in schools in small towns. Would the less complex small-town school provide more opportunities for democratic participation than its larger urban and suburban counterparts? Would community members be engaged in school life in ways that foster a sense of shared responsibility and an ethic of care? Would the community cherish local control and be committed to quality education for the town's children? And, in particular, would the boards be functioning effectively or not in small-town America?

We have written elsewhere about the professional educators and the students of small town schools; such articles are cited in the references. Here we focus on our observations and interviews of school board members. We sought to describe what school boards in small towns are

struggling with today, their irksome challenges and difficult dilemmas. We also looked for exemplary practices that would be worthwhile communicating to others.

The Changing Economic Face of Small Towns

The large-scale migration of people into the cities of the Sunbelt and a precipitous downturn in the economy of the Western United States during the last generation had changed the demography of the small towns we visited. Whereas once small towns housed stable and securely rooted citizens, during the last few years they have attracted many uprooted and transient people looking for inexpensive housing and special services. Even though some rural areas are growing, many small towns in the United States today are in severe economic jeopardy. The mines have been dug, the small farms previously run by families have been taken over by large operatives and have become mechanized, and many small industries have been shut down. Those events in turn, have meant that fewer people earn money to spend in small towns. So the small businesses are being closed.

An indicator we used to test the health of the economy was to count the number of boarded up shops on the square or in the downtown core. In most towns we visited, at least one-fourth of storefronts were boarded up or locked up securely. In some places there was no business community left. One newspaper publisher, a young man working alone on his Macintosh computer, lamented that this very edition

would be was his final issue. The last grocery store in town had closed and all of his advertising had disappeared.

All but a few of the towns we visited had faced sharp economic decline; those few which were still comparatively well off had taken advantage of their natural beauty and recreational potential. They were tapping in on the tourist market. Even in those vacation spots of the nation, however, the face of the small town was changing. Even rather well-off towns faced a changing school population and a diminishing sense of community support for the academic. There was an increasing unskilled work force arriving in small towns to serve the tourists and the increasing numbers of retirees who lived there.

The Changing Membership of School Boards

As the small towns change in population, so does the composition of school boards. Whereas school board members used to be economically secure and known as the "pillars" of the community, many of those people have moved away from the community. Today many school board members in small towns are working several part-time jobs just to get by. In some small towns the large land owners and the professionals have left. Many of them have moved West and South to the cities and the suburbs of the Sunbelt.

The 28 board members we interviewed were five women and 23 men; their occupations included housewives, retirees, self-employed small business owners, farmers, a private day-

care operator, a forestry-company employee, a highway worker, a telephone company mechanic and two dentists. Compared with national statistics our sample is more male and has fewer people from business and industry, but from what we understand to be happening in rural environments, our sample is not unusual. For example, in South Dakota almost 50% of board members are entrepreneurial farmers and ranchers and less than 12% are professionals. In the most rural regions of Kansas, 50% of board members are farmers and 18% are professionals.

It is true that many of the small towns in our sample were having hard times making ends meet and that the declining interest in serving the board among professionals and business people that we found there was atypical for the nation. Still the pattern of declining interest among the town's so-called pillars in the board was pervasive. One superintendent commented, "Thirty years ago, school boards had more professional people. They were made up of doctors, bankers, lawyers, and we had leaders in the community serving on school boards. As I see things now, it has changed." Another said, "we have a devil of a time trying to get people with some higher education to run for board positions."

Several teachers talked about their board members' lack of formal education and their lack of intelligent common sense. In one district teachers joked sardonically about a

graduating senior who had difficulty reading. "He'll probably run for the school board next year and be our boss," one of them said, and the others smiled and nodded agreement. That joke reflected the feeling of cynicism that some teachers we talked with had about board members in some places. Indeed, we found a growing estrangement between school board members and the educational professionals of many of the small towns we visited.

The few professionals who have stuck it out in economically depressed towns typically refused to run for the board. Small business owners, too, with their profits diminishing, considered it too risky to make controversial decisions in the community and, therefore, refused to run for the school board. One superintendent told us, "People say, I can't be bothered. Another superintendent said, "people say that they can't risk running for the board. The school board has become so political in this town that business people are fearful of losing customers if they make a controversial decision." In another town, we interviewed a dentist, one of only two professionals in our sample of school board members, who chose to set up practice in a small town, but who lost patients as a result of his vote on a controversial school issue. As we talked with him, he was having second thoughts about the wisdom of serving on the board.

Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs

In one small town, many citizens were still talking about a bitterly contested teachers' strike of a few years before. The strike exemplified in bold face the growing estrangement between the teachers and the school board. The teachers struck complaining that their insurance and retirement benefits were not sufficient. The board members, who were locally employed, in a depressed economy, faced difficult times themselves and were not particularly sympathetic with the teachers' demands. As we discovered, except for one board member who worked for a forestry-oriented corporation, no board member had any institutionalized plan for retirement or insurance or any part of a benefits package. It was not surprising, under those conditions, that there was an increasing rift between the teachers and board members in their attitudes and career orientations.

While communication between teachers and the board has always been important, the economic challenges and the educational issues of today require even more skillful communication between board members and educators. Public school teachers in small towns often are the only bureaucratic employees in a downwardly spiraling entrepreneurial economy. Employees of bureaucracies, such as school teachers and hospital nurses, typically have different life and work orientations than those who are self

employed or running a small business, such as carpenters, store owners or barbers. Whereas bureaucratic employees expect security, predictability and consistency in their jobs, the entrepreneurs must take initiative and risks in order to maintain an income. Like many middle and working-class people who are employed in the large corporations of our cities and suburbs, school teachers and administrators think frequently about their insurance and retirement benefits. In contrast, small-town entrepreneurs must use business acumen to plan well for "rainy days." Compared to many people employed in bureaucracies, the entrepreneurs' financial security is more tenuous, and their planning for the future, when they have time to do it, more sinuate. Many entrepreneurs have difficulty in visualizing a retirement of travel and leisure. It is no wonder that teachers and board members at times do not understand one another.

The Fears of Consolidation

Ominous shadows of consolidation loomed in the minds of board members and educators in small towns. Today it is perhaps the single most significant concern facing boards in small communities. Economic recession, the loss of jobs and population and the changing character of small towns has created a harassing challenge for small-town school districts. We heard over and over again of the inevitable heavy consequences of school district consolidation for very

small towns, "If the school goes, the community dies." In the small towns we visited, people went to the school for education, entertainment, social life, and community identity.

At what number is a district too small? Is a school too small? Many state legislatures are creating incentives for or forcing small districts to consolidate with one another. While no board we visited faced an imminent consolidation decision, there were some boards which had made unpopular decisions to close particular schools. Many districts had been consolidated in the recent past. One town in the Midwest greeted district office visitors with a sign listing 26 small districts that were forced in 1965 into consolidation. And there remains 25 years later some animosity between some of the people of those towns. In another state, we visited the Harmony School District; the only buildings in Harmony are the schools. Indeed, we have since learned of other school districts named Harmony, and their stories usually are the same. Several small towns had consolidated, but could not agree where to place the school, so they chose a neutral site, convenient to no one, and established the fantasy town of Harmony in the middle of a large pasture. School consolidation continues to be a difficult issue facing small-town school boards.

Communication: The Task of School Board Members

"As a newcomer in a small town, you learn quickly not to gossip. For all you know, you're talking to someone's sister or uncle." That caveat was offered to us several times in many places. For example, in one small town, two school secretaries were married to two of the district's principals; the superintendent's niece, who taught in the elementary school, was married to the high school baseball coach, who, in turn, had an uncle on the school board. Such kinship networks can, on the one hand, facilitate open communication in small towns. On the other hand, they can also increase the flow of colorful rumors and subtle inaccuracies, leading to the illusion that accurate communication about important matters has occurred. The people of some of the small towns we studied fell into the trap of thinking that just because they knew one another so well, they we were communicating accurately. Not so. Rumor is not the same as communication, and kinship networks are not the same as clear, two-way communication.

Board members in small towns must also be careful about the propriety of their decisions. In one town, a proposed site for a new high school had been on the Board's agenda for years. Yet, it had been voted down over and over. Then through a little-known technicality in the law, the board was able to buy land without a vote of the people. The townspeople were furious when the Board voted to buy the

land from a close relative of a board member. Besides, the football field at the proposed site would be just downwind from a local hog farm! Board members, through inadequate two-way communication with the citizens, can alienate their constituency rendering the board ineffective in making the best decisions for the academic welfare of students.

A quality education, especially in small towns with limited resources, also requires frequent communication among the school board, administrators, teachers and students. Like the North Dakota board we observed, board members, administrators and teachers must work together to build a quality educational program for the community. School boards in small towns must make an active effort to communicate regularly and routinely to their various constituencies. They need to listen actively to community members, administrators, teachers, and students.

Exemplary Practices in Board Work

Even in the face of trying economic circumstances, changing populations, and the threatening shadow of consolidation, some boards we studied were behaving creatively and effectively. In particular, we found five boards that were coping successfully with arduous challenges by initiating innovative forms of communication and collaboration in their communities. We present them here to demonstrate what school boards can do.

(1) Administrative Action for School Desegregation

School Boards can initiate communication about important moral issues in the community.

During our visit to the deep South we uncovered the exemplary endeavor of a school board a generation ago which was still having favorable effects today. The year before school desegregation had to take place, by federal mandate, Black and White administrators, with approval and support from the school board, held discussions on how to make a smooth and effective transition. Of course this was a very difficult decision, changing the town's practices. The board asked the superintendent and principals to convene meetings of parents and students in both the Black and White communities to discuss how the newly desegregated school would operate. Later the board asked student leaders from the Black and White segregated schools to come together to prepare a student handbook for the desegregated high school. A Black principal during those days, now retired, told us, "We worked hard to get the Black and White power structures together. We were fortunate in having a board and superintendent who wished to pull both races together. However, they also needed the pressure from the federal government to make that happen. It wouldn't have happened by itself. Still they learned to pull together." Today we see this as heroic leadership on the part of the board and its administrators in a community that could have been torn

apart. It demonstrated the moral leadership that can occur in our public schools.

(2) Parent Action For Superior Schools (PASS)

School boards can stimulate parent and community participation in school affairs.

In all districts we studied the elementary principals reported high parent participation in teacher-parent conferences and school open houses. Responses from the secondary principals, however, indicated that parent visits to the classrooms and teachers dropped off at the middle school or junior high and dropped off even more in the high school. Excepting for parents' fascination with the allure of high school competitive sports, their active interest in the school's curriculum and instruction seemed to decrease as their children matured into adolescence and spent more and more time with friends outside the home. We found too that many parents thought that administrators and board members tended to discourage them from participating and community participation in the academic life of secondary schools. We spoke with some parents who felt intimidated and not welcomed by high school teachers and administrators.

One parent group, with the acronym PASS (Parent Action for Superior Schools), had formed to support parents who wanted to become more involved in helping schools at all levels, K-12. "We wanted people to interested in schools," said a spokesperson who had herself graduated from the local

high school and now had the last of her five children about to graduate. She wanted a good school system from kindergarten to high school.

She reported, "We wanted to help. The school people were very intimidated at first. We did things like safety on buses. We drew lines where the bus kids were supposed to go so they couldn't get in the way of buses. We put a phone in the middle school for kids to use. We wanted as much emphasis on academics as athletics, so we put up bulletin boards for academic stars. We developed an academic recognition program. We proved ourselves. Now we work closely with the school board. We meet with them every other month, and we get on the agenda of board meetings. We do not take political sides in an election, we just want the schools to be good."

In that district, a few parents had taken the initiative to improve schools. Later the school board lauded the parents' efforts. While members of PASS were first held "suspect" by teachers for their lack of pedagogical knowledge and experience, they proved their worth by enabling teachers and administrators work more effectively with students. They started activities that were appreciated by the board, students, teachers, and administrators.

School boards can stimulate parent and community initiative in improving schools, not only to ameliorate

public relations but also because of the positive contributions they can make to the academic program.

(3) Teacher-Administrator-Board (TAB) communications

School Boards can regularly communicate with teachers in the district in meaningful ways.

In one district communication between teachers and board members was facilitated in a formal group known by the acronym of TAB (Teachers-Administrators-Board), which met three times a year to exchange the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of key actors in the district. A group of 13, TAB, was constituted of two board members, two administrators, two teachers from each of the four schools, and the superintendent. Membership was rotated yearly so that all administrators and board members could serve for one year during each successive three-year period. Meetings were run by the superintendent with an open agenda; they were consciously planned to be "open bitch sessions", according to one board member, and were characterized by "active participation, spirited exchanges and high emotional involvement." One board member said of the TAB. "I enjoy it more than anything else I do as a board member. We talk frankly with the teachers about everything from potholes and unlocked lockers to pay increases and morale."

The meeting just prior to our visit to the district had been particularly engaging; it had started at 5:30 pm and

did not end until midnight. Issues for TAB discussion included: 1) alcohol use among teenagers, 2) infrequent and poor communication between teachers at the two elementary schools, 3)inadequate offerings in vocational education and 4) miscommunication between teachers in the junior high and high school. The TAB did not try to solve problems and did not have a mandate for decision making, but for the superintendent and the board it helped uncover a number of concerns in the district that demanded attention. Moreover, the TAB surfaced problems in a spirit of cooperation and trust, bringing teachers and board members closer together. One board member told us, "Because of TAB I have come to see the teacher point of view." One teacher commented, "I've learned through our TAB meetings to trust board members more than I did before, and I let my colleagues know about that."

Formal advisory groups which meet in an atmosphere of trust and openness can contribute effectively to the problem-solving ability of a district. In some districts, particularly those that are seeking to employ cooperative bargaining in lieu of adversarial bargaining, representatives of the teachers' association meet regularly with the school board to discuss matters of mutual interest and concern and to keep in continual contact about the contract. They try to prevent "mole hills from becoming mountains," as one participant commented. Indeed, we were surprised to find so few collaborative meetings of that kind

taking place in the districts we visited. We expected small to be more beautiful in its patterns of cooperation than it was. Small towns have the advantage of being less socially complex, yet school boards and teachers must work together cooperatively and harmoniously for effective education to take place.

School Boards can initiate meaningful and personal meetings with teachers and principals. Schools as economically vulnerable as so many small-town schools are, cannot afford the petty jealousies and adversarial clashes between boards and teachers that occupy so much energy of many school districts across the country. The time is ripe for more TABs across the nation.

(4) Student Participation in School Board Meetings

Student representatives can be included in most formal school board deliberations.

In our study of 25 small-town districts, we only found one school board which regularly invited high school students to its formal meetings. There, the board members, administrators, and students all felt satisfied with the students' participation. One board member told us, "I'm impressed with the mature judgement of our student representatives." Another said, "those students bring a different perspective and that's important to the board." The superintendent said, "I'm very proud of our student representatives." One of the students said, "At first I was

scared, but after while I felt really free to speak my mind."

Our experiences with that district demonstrated that student participation in board meetings can be beneficial for three reasons: 1) Student participation on the school board offers them an important educational experience; while board discussions might at times be tedious, they offer a living experience in community governance and representative democracy. 2) Since, school board members often are not parents of current students in the schools and have little communication with the students of the district, student representatives can serve as an ready source of information for board members. 3) The school board should attempt to include as many different voices as possible, to solicit information from and communication with all community groups. Student voice during board discussions can help board members to stay open and receptive to their most important constituency.

(5) Board to Board Relationships

Schools boards can cooperate effectively with neighboring school boards and districts to assure educational quality and opportunity.

Unless school districts with from 450 to 2,000 students have special economic advantages, such as a tourist market or federal impact funds, they typically have limited curricular and sometimes meager extra-curricular offerings.

Although many of the school districts we studied were geographically isolated, we were encouraged by the district-to-district and board-to-board cooperation we saw in some of them, particularly in the Midwest. In that region, school boards and superintendents were purchasing materials collaboratively, sharing specialized classes primarily in vocational and special education; sharing teachers in the sciences and foreign languages, and combining together to amass sufficient participants for athletic teams, especially in baseball and football. In some parts of the United States county units provided special-education resources to small districts. We were particularly impressed in the upper Midwest by cross-district consortia working to upgrade the special-education programs in local districts.

Board members can look beyond the boundaries of their own districts to use resources effectively and to improve educational opportunities for all students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Small-town school boards, such as the one we visited in North Dakota, are made up of conscientious, hardworking, and caring citizens, who, because of mass migrations to Sunbelt cities and a precipitous drop in the number of agricultural laborers, face arduous economic challenges and heavy educational dilemmas.

The changing economic face of many small towns is not beautiful. Many mines have been dug; many small farms, previously run by families and hired hands, have been bought by large corporations and have become mechanized; and many small industries have been shut down. Fewer and fewer people are spending their money in the old downtowns of small towns, leaving the ghostly appearance of hollow buildings in what was once the heart of the town.

The changing economic face of small towns, so far as schools are concerned, includes: (1) Changing membership of school boards: Fewer professionals and business owners than before are participating now in small-town boards; (2) A rift between bureaucrats and entrepreneurs: Public-school educators in small towns nowadays are frequently the only bureaucratic employees in a downwardly spiraling entrepreneurial economy; and (3) A fear of consolidation: People of small towns fear that their schools will be subsumed into another district and that they will thereby lose their identity and cohesiveness as a community.

Because of the economic insecurities of a changing demographic landscape in rural America, small-town school boards, must strive even more than before to be an anchor for American democracy. They still retain the responsibility of keeping communication open and accurate among educators, students, and citizens. Board members should not underestimate how laborious it can be to

facilitate effective communication just because their towns are small. Kinship networks and rumors are not adequate substitutes for open, two-way communication about education in the community.

Five exemplary practices in school-board communication, which we observed in small-town districts across America, shined as beacons for others to follow. They were:

(1) Administrative action for school desegregation, i.e., a board encouraged Black and White administrators, teachers, and students to plan collaboratively the transition from a segregated to a desegregated district.

(2) Parent action for superior schools, i.e., a board encouraged development of a formal group of parents, known as PASS, to act constructively on behalf of the town's schools.

(3) Teachers-Administrators-Board communication, i.e., a board encouraged meetings with a representative group of teachers and administrators, known as TAB, to surface problems and concerns together three or four times a year.

(4) Student participation in school board meetings, i.e., a board encouraged high school students, who represented the student body, to take part regularly in its meetings.

(5) Board to board cooperation, i.e., a board encouraged cooperation with neighboring districts in purchasing materials, holding specialized classes, sharing

teachers of special subjects, and combining forces to have enough students for baseball and football teams.

Nowadays small-town school boards have a greater challenge than ever before to make communication about public education more effective for their communities. Although some small-town boards appear to be overwhelmed by the burdensome challenges of their economic hardships, others are hard at work building trust with educators, listening carefully to students, engaging citizens constructively, and reaching out to nearby communities to cooperate. They are hard at work to make our schools better.

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